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SUBJECT: BHUTANESE REFUGEES: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

REF: A. NEW DELHI 2214

[¶B.](#) NEW DELHI 2127
[¶C.](#) 1992 KATHMANDU 7047
[¶D.](#) AMNESTY INTL REPORT 08/1994
[¶E.](#) HUM. RIGHTS WATCH 05/2003
[¶F.](#) 1991 KATHMANDU 6122
[¶G.](#) 1991 KATHMANDU 3936
[¶H.](#) 1992 KATHMANDU 631
[¶I.](#) 1991 KATHMANDU 7615
[¶J.](#) 1992 KATHMANDU 2347
[¶K.](#) 1992 CALCUTTA 1432
[¶L.](#) 1992 KATHMANDU 5030

Classified By: Ambassador Michael E. Malinowski for Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

[¶11.](#) (SBU) Summary. The history and complexity of the Bhutanese refugee situation is worth recollecting in the light of reliable documentation. The first Nepali-speaking immigrants settled in Bhutan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries at the invitation of the then-King of Bhutan in an effort to cultivate the lowlands of Bhutan and prevent Assamese and Bengalis from moving north into Bhutanese territory. In 1958, the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) granted citizenship to these settlers. Thirty years later, however, the RGOB severely restricted citizenship rights and initiated a census in Southern Bhutan that resulted in the classification of many ethnic Nepalis as non-nationals. Widespread unrest with the new government policies began in early 1990, culminating in mass demonstrations in September [¶11990.](#)

[¶12.](#) (SBU) Summary Continued: The environment for ethnic Nepalis became increasingly tense and uncertain with reports of arbitrary arrest, accompanied by torture and rape, of those who participated, or whose families participated, in the demonstrations. By June 1991, UNHCR confirmed that 6,000 Bhutanese refugees had fled to Nepal, where the vast majority had blended into ancestral villages. The flow of refugees from Bhutan increased dramatically in the fall of 1991 and continued through September 1992 when the population reached 67,500. Until January 1992, when UNHCR became directly involved in refugee care and maintenance, the refugees subsisted on local NGO assistance and charity. At that time, the population suffered from poor health and sanitary conditions with high rates of child mortality. A close reading of the historical record of the last several decades in Bhutan points to the inescapable conclusion that the refugee problem is in fact the result of systematic ethnic discrimination and forced expulsions. End Summary.

[¶13.](#) (U) Post agrees with Ref A recommendation that the U.S. and other international observers should understand the history and complexity of the Bhutanese refugee situation. Upon review of State Department cables from 1990-1992 and documents prepared by UNHCR, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, the following review of the origins of the refugee imbroglio is meant to contribute to that understanding.

Nepali Migration to Bhutan and Early Citizenship

[¶14.](#) (SBU) The rulers of the Kingdom of Bhutan have always been ethnically sensitive. Since India's annexation of Sikkim in 1975, Bhutan has been unique as a Tibetan ethnic and cultural enclave south of the Himalayas. Small and vulnerable to the much larger ethnic populations south of Bhutan, the Kingdom has often reacted strongly to perceptions of threats from the south. As a result, in the late 19th century, the King of Bhutan appealed to the Nepali ruling family, the Ranas, requesting ethnic Nepalis -- who were considered perhaps less threatening than the Assamese or Bengalis due to their feudal traditions and distance from Bhutan -- to settle in the country's lowlands. Northern Bhutanese at that time were not interested in settling in the uncultivated forests and jungles of the south. As a result, numbers of Nepalis migrated to southern Bhutan and, on their own, cleared and cultivated the land. With this initial success, many more Nepalis followed and settled peacefully in Bhutan. In 1958, the King of Bhutan adopted the country's first Nationality Law, which granted citizenship to all people with only two

conditions -- they must have resided in Bhutan for more than 10 years and must own agricultural land.

Citizenship Rights Restricted:
Census Discriminates Against Southern Bhutanese

15. (SBU) The RGOB received the first of two wake-up calls raising fears of cultural and political annihilation when India, by exploiting ethnic rifts between Nepalis and Lepchas, annexed Sikkim in 1975. In 1977, the RGOB adopted the Bhutan Citizenship Act, which raised the threshold for citizenship to include, for the first time, cultural requirements, such as spoken and written knowledge of the Bhutanese language. All those granted citizenship were also required to swear an oath of loyalty to the King of Bhutan and to promise to observe "all the customs and traditions of the people of Bhutan." The law also, for the first time, discouraged Bhutanese citizens from marrying non-Bhutanese by not granting citizenship to the spouse or their children. The 1980 Marriage Act also denied certain facilities, such as land and seed distribution and loans, to any citizen who married a foreigner. The Act also refused promotion to any government official who married a non-Bhutanese.

16. (C) The second wake-up call arrived in the late 1980s when political unrest in Nepal laid siege to Nepal's monarchy and autocratic Panchayat (partyless) government. By 1989, the GON's acquisition of defensive security equipment from China led to India's refusal to renew the overland Trade and Transit Treaty, effectively imposing an embargo on the country and causing fuel and commodity shortages. In 1991, the one-party system collapsed and was replaced by a multiparty government.

17. (SBU) Concurrently with these events, the RGOB adopted the Bhutan Citizenship Act of 1985, which granted citizenship only to those who were resident in Bhutan on or before December 31, 1958, and whose names were registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs. If a resident did not meet these requirements, they could apply for naturalized citizenship provided that certain conditions were met, including 20 years residency, proficiency in speaking and written Dzongkha, a "good moral character," and "no record of having spoken or acted against the King, Country and People of Bhutan in any manner whatsoever." The law also allowed the government to strip citizenship arbitrarily from any naturalized citizen.

18. (SBU) In 1987, the RGOB initiated a census intended to implement the 1985 Citizenship Act, resulting in the mass de-nationalization of many ethnic Nepalis. The census was implemented only in southern Bhutan. According to interviews of refugees in 1991 and of southern Bhutanese in 1993, the RGOB specifically required people to present land tax receipts from 1958 to qualify as citizens (Refs C and D). Many complained that it was not reasonable for the government to expect barely literate peasants and farmers to have saved tax receipts for thirty years. Although many of these people held Bhutanese citizenship cards issued during the earlier census in 1979, these cards did not qualify them for citizenship status under the new law. In some cases, people were denied citizenship because they had inherited land from parents after 1958 and could not, therefore, demonstrate land tax receipts in their own name from before 1958. Others claimed that their evidence of citizenship was confiscated by officials and that they were later labeled as non-nationals. In January 1989, King Wangchuk decreed a "one nation, one people" policy that required practice of Drukpa culture through a compulsory dress code and the termination of Nepali language instruction in schools (Ref E). These policies gave rise to fears in southern Bhutan that those who were not categorized as bona fide citizens in the census would be forced to leave the country.

Political Unrest Leads to Mass Expulsions

19. (C) Unrest at government policies on national integration and the census spread in southern Bhutan in early 1990, culminating in a series of demonstrations throughout southern Bhutan in September 1990. The first signs of violent activities by government opponents reportedly occurred in February 1990, involving extortion and stripping of people wearing northern Bhutanese dress. Later, however, these activities reportedly included more serious crimes, such as murder and kidnapping with attacks directed at census officers and other officials. As a result, the government suspended schools and health services in southern Bhutan. The government increased its security presence in Southern Bhutan and sought to suppress the political demonstrations, leading to cases of arbitrary arrest, accompanied by torture and rape. In August 1991, one refugee woman explained to EmbOff that she had fled Bhutan with her 14-year-old daughter after her husband was arrested and they were both raped by

soldiers (Ref C). Reports of widespread rape of Nepali ethnic women by Bhutanese troops was particularly prevalent (Ref F). In early 1991, victims of these violations and those who feared becoming victims began to flee from southern Bhutan.

¶10. (C) The RGOB also began enforcing the results of the census in mid-1991, leading to forcible expulsions of entire families and, in a few cases, whole villages. In 1991-1992, RGOB officials reportedly began classifying individuals as non-nationals if they had a close relative who had participated in the 1990 demonstrations or who had already left Bhutan for Nepal. People who were classified as non-nationals said that they were told by local government officials to leave the country within a short time or pay a fine or be imprisoned (Ref D). Many of them were also required to sign "voluntary emigration" forms before leaving.

During a visit to the camps in August 1991, EmbOff learned that 267 asylum seekers had arrived the day before, mostly from the same village, reporting that a 16-man census team, backed by a contingent of 50 soldiers, enforcing the census had demanded that the village headman supply 10 women between 12 and 25 years of age to the group every night. When the villagers refused, their homes were burned down and they fled. Internal UNHCR reports at the time cited continuing human rights violations and forced expulsions throughout 1991 and 1992.

The Flow of Refugees Into Nepal

¶11. (C) The first wave of refugees coincided with the September 1990 demonstrations. Most of these people reportedly fled to neighboring states of Assam and West Bengal in India and to Nepal where they were able to assimilate due to family ties. The first half of 1991 witnessed a steady trickle into Nepal of refugees without family ties who settled in camps (Ref C). By June 1991, UNHCR estimated that roughly 6,000 refugees had entered Nepal, although most had blended into their ancestral villages (Ref G) while the Nepal Red Cross, with UNHCR financing, was supplying relief to 84 families (430 persons) living on river banks in eastern Nepal. UNHCR was seeking direct involvement in refugee care and maintenance, but had been stymied by bureaucratic delays within the Government of Nepal (GON). By August 1991, a new pattern of arrivals emerged with whole families transiting directly to Nepal, often on buses with written instructions from the RGOB to proceed to Maidhar camp, the larger of the two refugee camps in eastern Nepal at that time (Ref H).

¶12. (SBU) A rough timeline of refugee flows into camps is outlined here with data from Embassy reporting. These numbers do not include those who assimilated locally in India and Nepal.

June 1991 -- 430 persons
September 1991 -- 3,000 persons
November 1991 -- 5,500 persons
January 1992 -- 14,000 persons
March 1992 -- 25,000 persons
June 1992 -- 40,000 persons
September 1992 -- 67,500 persons

¶13. (C) Conditions in the refugee camps remained inadequate throughout 2001-2002. By October 1991, 26 deaths were reported due to malaria and malnutrition. There were no educational or recreation facilities available, and the refugees survived on what little assistance they received from international charitable organizations and local charities in Jhapa District (Ref I). UNHCR was not able to become directly involved in refugee care and maintenance until January 1992, after the refugee population had grown to 14,000. Even as late as June 1992, UNHCR upgraded the refugee situation to "emergency" status due to inadequate sanitation and health facilities and a strong probability of epidemic disease. The mortality rate for children under 5 years of age in the camps was very high with 19.3 deaths daily per 10,000 children, due primarily to diarrhea and malnutrition.

¶14. (C) In response to an RGOB claim that most of the refugees had actually come from Assam and areas in Nepal, in April 1992, the GON invited the RGOB to jointly screen the refugees, but this offer was not accepted (Ref J). ConGen Calcutta reported in May 1992 that there was little evidence that any sizable portion of the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal were actually Indian residents fleeing violence in Assam (Ref K). The Embassy also reported strong evidence that the overwhelming majority of refugees were coming from Bhutan. According to the Lutheran World Foundation, UNHCR's main implementing partner, in August 1992, vehicles bringing in new refugee arrivals carried passenger lists stamped by the RGOB containing names, ages, source villages and compensation paid to passengers (Ref L). By September 1992, new arrivals

were down markedly, averaging below 100 per day from a height of 300 per day in June 1992.

Comment

115. (C) It is clear from the most reliable contemporary reports that the events leading to the mass exodus of ethnic Nepalis from Bhutan in the early 1990s were ethnically motivated. It is in the RGOB's interest to characterize the expulsion of Nepali-ethnic Bhutanese in 1991-1993 as an appropriate response to illegal immigration and unlawful political agitation and violence. While it is certainly true that ethnic Nepalis in Bhutan were a voice for change, the situation was aggravated by laws and policies that required conformity with majority (i.e., Tantric Buddhist) Bhutanese culture and imposed second-hand citizenship status on ethnic Nepalis. The methods and policies adopted by the RGOB are not justifiable by international standards of the 21st century.

116. (C) According to Ref B, the Bhutanese king suggested that the establishment of UNHCR-run camps in Eastern Nepal precipitated the outflow of refugees attracted by free food, shelter and education. However, UNHCR did not become involved directly until January 2002 when the population had already reached 14,000. Moreover, the camps suffered from poor nutrition and sanitation throughout 2002 -- hardly the paradise described by the King. King Wangchuk also questioned the screening process conducted by the GON and UNHCR. However, first-hand accounts of officials interviewing potential refugees, including Ambassador Malinowski, who was DCM at the time, indicate very specific and extensive information of systematic and widespread ethnic discrimination forcing ethnic Nepalis to leave Bhutan. Post hopes that this account will contribute to a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the origins of the Bhutanese refugee situation. End Comment.

MALINOWSKI